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Why Proverbs? | Proverbs 1:1-7 Sermon

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Proverbs today are pithy sayings we've adopted in our culture that contain a nuggest of advice for life. If you had to choose one everyday proverb to live your life by, what would it be? Would it be:

1. "If you want something done right, do it yourself." Maybe you're all about individual responsibility and high quality work. Or how about?
2. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That's the golden rule, right? That seems like a pretty good proverb to live by. Or maybe you've heard this one?
3. "Good things come to those who wait." I don't think I would recommend choosing that one even if that one proves to be true. Some of you may know someone who would choose this proverb.
4. "One man's trash is another man's treasure." On the other side some of you may be thinking…
5. "Cleanliness is next to godliness." By the way. This is not a Bible verse. Some believe…
6. "Fortune favors the bold." But others think…
7. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

What if you choose a proverb from the Bible? Would you live your life by one of those?

> **Proverbs 15:22**
> Plans fail for lack of counsel,
> but with many advisers they succeed. (NIV)

That one tells us its good to get advice from many people before going forward with your plans. How about?

> **Proverbs 16:9**
> The heart of man plans his way,
> but the Lord establishes his steps. (ESV)

Making this one your life proverb would bolster your confidence in God, wouldn't it? I've often recalled that one to mind and found it helpful when I'm not sure what to do next. But there are other proverbs that might not make so much sense to make your life proverb.

> **Proverbs 16:33**
> The lot is cast into the lap,
> but its every decision is from the Lord.

So should Christians always pick straws to make decisions? Proverbs are generally true but not true all the time. For example the saying "many hands make light work" is a type of proverb. That's often true. The more people that chip in on a job the faster it usually goes. But what if those hands belong to babies? Then many hands make more and more work. So we should never read a proverb as a universal truth but try to

understand the general truth it is trying to communicate to us. If we don't understand proverbs are generally true nuggets of wisdom, they can really confuse us.

> **Proverbs 26:9**
> Like a thornbush in a drunkard's hand
> is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.

That's a fun one. When I was co-leading a Bible study for college guys back at George Mason University, one of my students, liked to quote that one. Has anyone ever quoted a proverb at you instead of for you? Proverbs can hurt. It's easy to misapply them. But I believe there is a Proverb in this book that God is calling us to live by and it's one that is always good all the time. As I begin to tell you about that Proverb I have four questions I want us to answer. 1) What is a proverb? 2) Why Proverbs? 3) Who is Proverbs for? 4) What's the big idea of Proverbs? So first…

1. What is a proverb? (v1)

The first seven verses of the book of Proverbs are a preamble. Preamble is not a word I use very often but it means an introductory remark or opening statement. So the book of Proverbs introduces itself and explains what a proverb is in the first seven verses. It starts like this…

> **Proverbs 1:1**
> The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

The word "proverb" comes from the Hebrew word "mashal" and means "a short, pithy saying" that's "easy to remember." The exact same word in Hebrew can also mean "to rule" or "govern" so you get the idea that proverbs are short, pithy, statements we use to rule or govern our lives. So with that in mind I'd like to propose this definition of what a Proverb is.

> ***Proverbs are brief poetic sayings meant to teach us wisdom.***

Have you ever heard someone say something that was both brief and poetic and you thought, "Wow, that was really good!" I short clip went viral recently with Keanu Reeves and Stephen Colbert. Colbert was interviewing Keanu Reeves, the star of the Matrix, and he asked him. "What do you think happens when we die, Keanu Reeves?" Keanu sat back, took a deep breath in and out, and said, "I know that the ones who love us will miss us." To which Stephen Colbert shook his hand. What he said sounded like a Proverb. It was short, poetic, and meaningful.

But Proverbs are God's word and they have something special to teach us—wisdom. The Hebrew word for wisdom—"hokmah"—at its most basic level means "the skill of living." But it's not just any kind of living, like living for the weekend or for my retirement or for my family and friends. It's living for God. It's living the way he designed us to live. Wisdom is living a life that honors God every day in every part of our life. So Proverbs are brief poetic sayings meant to teach us God's wisdom.

Wisdom is knowing how to have a good marriage, which God said we can often have if we do it his way. Wisdom is knowing how to be a good parent in a way that honors God and is good for your child. Wisdom is using your money thoughtfully and fairly whether you're rich or poor. Wisdom is a politician or government official who rules justly and won't let those with the money and power make the rules. Wisdom is knowing the right thing to say, when to say it, and how to say it. Wisdom is a business owner who creates a high-quality product and treats her employees and customers well. Wisdom helps us navigate the big important high-stakes decisions, but also the normal choices we encounter everyday.

Verse one attributes these first Proverbs to king Solomon son of David. David was the most famous king of Israel and he made his son Solomon king at an early age. When he became king Solomon offered a great sacrifice to the Lord, "a thousand burnt offerings" (1 Kings 3:4b). Then God appeared to Solomon in a dream and asked him what he could give him.

Because he was young he asked God to give him wisdom to rule over God's people Israel. That pleased God so much so that he gives him wisdom and discernment but also wealth and honor (1 Kings 3:1-15). And then right after this the Bible tells a story demonstrating Solomon's wisdom. Two women appeared before Solomon fighting over a baby. One woman had rolled on her own baby during the night with tragic consequences, and she had stolen the other woman's baby to be her own. But of course she denied the accusation. How was Solomon to know which woman was right? They didn't have DNA tests back then.

He tells his soldiers to bring him a sword and he says to cut the baby in half and give one half to each woman. The real mother says, "No! Don't kill him. Give her the baby" but the fake says, "Cut him in two!" And that's how Solomon figured it out. The real mom would never say such a thing (1 Kings 3:16-28). God had given Solomon supernatural wisdom, and now through the book of Proverbs you and I have an opportunity to receive supernatural wisdom for our lives too. We can learn "The skill of living (for God)" in our everyday lives.

2. Why Proverbs? (v2-4)

Why did I choose Proverbs for us? When I was growing up almost every night my dad would come into our boys' dormitory, sit on the side of my bed, and he would pray that God would give us "wisdom." You may have heard recently that the President dropped by a big church outside of Washington DC for prayer. That was the church I used to go to when I lived in Falls Church Virginia. And what did the Pastor pray for the President? <u>He prayed for wisdom</u>. It doesn't matter if you're a child or the President of the United States, we all need wisdom. We all need to know how to live our life the way God designed it.

In verses 2-6 Proverbs gives us its purpose-statement. It tells us why Solomon and the other authors and scribes we'll encounter later in the book compiled this book of wisdom sayings.

> **Proverbs 1:2-4**
> 2 for gaining wisdom and instruction;
> for understanding words of insight;
> 3 for receiving instruction in prudent behavior,
> doing what is right and just and fair;
> 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple,
> knowledge and discretion to the young—

We read and study Proverbs in order to gain wisdom. Verses 2-4 expand our understanding of what wisdom is by using similar words that broaden its definition and add depth.

- **Instruction (muwsar)**

When we think of instruction we think of going to class, but this word has a serious tone to it. It can mean discipline, correction, or punishment. This instruction can include verbal rebukes (Prov 12:1) or physical punishment (Prov 13:24). Like, "My boss gave me firm instruction on how I needed to improve" or "my dad instructed me with consquences." Why Proverbs? Even though it's never fun sometimes we need correction and the book of Proverbs offers us that correction.

- **Understanding (biyn)**

This word "describes a depth of knowledge beyond mere awareness…" You perceive it. You discern it. See, I understand how to use a tape measure, and hammer, and nails, but my level of understanding is pretty shallow. But if you ask a construction worker how to use a tape measure, and hammer, and nails, they can show you a whole lot more because of their years of construction experience. Why Proverbs? We don't want to be shallow people. We want to get it, we want to have a deep understanding of how life works.

- **Knowledge (da'at)**

This means "to know." Wisdom is not the exact same thing as knowledge or intelligence. It can include those things, but you don't have to have a high IQ to be wise. You can be great at Jeopardy but a foolish person. Having a high IQ means you're great at doing math and thinking logically but that doesn't mean you know how to live life God's way. Wisdom is more like having a high EQ—emotional intelligence. You might not have the largest intellect in the room but if you recognize and understand your own emotions, don't let your emotions control you, and you can recognize what others are feeling and empathize with them, then you have a high EQ. Wisdom does require knowledge of situations and people but you don't have to be a genius to be wise. You just have to have a sense of God's direction in difficult situations.

As a church we can have all the Bible knowledge in the world. But if we don't know how to put the Bible into practice in our everyday lives, then we're missing wisdom. If we know lot's of Bible trivia but aren't worshipping God and developing a relationship with him, then we're missing wisdom. If we're not loving our neighbor or caring for the least of these, then we're missing wisdom. Paul warns us in the New Testament "… knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (1 Cor 8:1). Everything we learn about God should go right into practice. Why proverbs? Because we want the knowledge necessary to act wisely. What other words describe wisdom?

- **Righteousness (sedeq), justice (mispat), and fairness (mesarim)**

When you understand how to live life God's way, when you have the knowledge to do it, and when you have friends and family who are willing to correct you, the outcome is going to be right, just, and fair. There's a social aspect to wisdom. Wisdom helps me treat my neighbor, coworker, family members, the poor, immigrants with respect and dignity. Wisdom helps me save thoughtfully but also give generously (Prov 11:24-25). Wisdom helps me look beyond myself to the needs of others. Why proverbs? It helps us get past surface-level knowledge to real depth and it helps us love our neighbors well.

3. Who is Proverbs for? (v4-6)

A better way of asking this question is, "Who is wisdom for?" Do you want wisdom? If you do, if you honestly truly want to know how to live life the way God intends, then Proverbs is for you.

> **Proverbs 1:4-6**
> 4 for giving prudence to those who are simple,
> knowledge and discretion to the young—
> 5 let the wise listen and add to their learning,
> and let the discerning get guidance—
> 6 for understanding proverbs and parables,
> the sayings and riddles of the wise.

Proverbs is for everyone. It casts a wide net. If you're simple, so neither foolish nor wise, then Proverbs is for you. If you're young—in the first nine chapters it's written like a father giving advice to his son (he says "my son" over and over again)—so if you're a teenager or young adult, guy or girl, Proverbs is for you. Or if

you are wise already, if you are already discerning, so discerning you have your own genre of wisdom (A "Bernieism" or something like that…), Proverbs is for you. Proverbs is for everyone.

4. What's the big idea of Proverbs? (v7)

Now at the end of the preamble (introduction) we find the key-verse for the whole of Proverbs. It's a verse that's theme is going to come up again and again throughout Proverbs, "the fear of the Lord."

> **Proverbs 1:7**
> The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
> but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

If you had to choose one proverb to live your whole life by, I'd hope that this would be it. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. What does it mean to fear the Lord? Dr. Bruce Waltke says, "You really believe his promises are secure and his threats are real." You believe in God (Psalm 19:1) and you take his words in the Scriptures seriously (Psalm 19:7-9). You understand that God designed the world a certain way and that if you live life that way it will go well for you but if you disobey there will be consequences. Another defined it as "reverent obedience."

It's not just fear and reverence of any god. It's a fear of our God. Do you see in your Bible how "LORD" is in upper case? That's signaling that this is God's special covenant name, "Yahweh." That's a name he gave his people Israel to identify him. So there is fear and reverence but it's based in relationship. It's like the fear a young boy has of his loving father. He knows if he does something wrong his Father will correct him but he also knows that his same father wouldn't hesitate to lay down his life for him. Wisdom is based in a healthy aw-filled reverance for God and his way of doing things in this world.

As we think about the God of the whole Bible we remember that he too will correct us when we need it but he has already laid down a life, the life of his Son Christ Jesus for us. God's love for us expressed through Jesus gives us a reverent awe in our hearts. Wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord.

Rev. Dr. Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA on June 15, 2019 when he served there as pastor. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon at archive.org or read on Substack and Blogger.

Discussion Questions

Questions for small groups, Bible studies, or personal devotionals:

1. What's a saying you've chosen to live your life by?
2. In what part of your life do you feel you need more wisdom?
3. How would you explain wisdom to someone whose never heard the term?
4. What's one way you recommend for growing in wisdom?
5. In what part of your life do you want prayer for wisdom?

Resource Recommendations

Some of the following are affiliate links, which means we get a small percentage if you purchase the resource through the link. We also recommend checking out your local library or thrift store.

How To Read Proverbs (affiliate link) by Tremper Longman III

The Book of Proverbs by BibleProject

Proverbs Sermon Series

Go through the Proverbs with Jonathan Romig in this sermon series: Everyday Wisdom

Endnotes

The 50 most important English proverbs. PhraseMix. https://www.phrasemix.com/collections/the-50-most-important-english-proverbs Accessed 6/13/2019.

Mounce's Expository Dictionary. Accordance Bible Software. H5442

How to Read Proverbs (affiliate link) by Tremper Longman III. Page 14-16,

Mounce's Expository Dictionary (affiliate link). Old Testament: Understand.

Righteousness (sedeq), justice (mispat), and fairness (mesarim) are ethical terms, and as we read on we will see that one cannot possess them without wisdom—nor wisdom without righteousness, justice and virtue. In other words, wisdom in Proverbs is an ethical quality. The wise are on the side of the good. *How to Read Proverbs* by Tremper Longman III. Page 17.

The Preacher's Commentary Series, Volume 15: Proverbs. Proverbs 1:7.

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise noted.

You can also watch the sermon on YouTube.